

WARNING!

The views expressed in FMSO publications and reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

The Bosnian Warring Factions: A Brief Synopsis

by LTC John E. Sray, U.S. Army
January 1995

The salient point to keep in mind about the primary Bosnian warring factions concerns their individual rhetoric and often professional propaganda. An astute observer of this civil war must learn to disregard the bombastic words which emanate from Serbs, Muslims, and Croats as well as their apologists to describe each other and justify their respective actions. This short paper attempts to accomplish this task by discussing the goals and strategies employed by these groups to attain their specific objectives. Hopefully, it will help to unravel the myriad of myths which continue to be perpetuated about this controversial conflict.

THE BOSNIAN SERBS

The primary aim of the Bosnian Serbs is to possess a contiguous territory occupied by ethnic Serbs in an independent Bosnian Serb state. They desire that this territory include the areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter referred to as Bosnia) historically inhabited by Serbs to include the Serbian-dominated sections of Sarajevo. This area must be capable of economic self-sufficiency and thus contain a part of the coastline on the Adriatic Sea.

Due to their inherent distrust of the media and their incompetence in dealing with it, Serbian strategy to achieve this aim has relied solely on the use of military force. They drive the other nationalities from desired lands and subsequently coerce their opponent to agree to end the fighting on terms favorable to themselves. Such arrangements have sometimes resulted in ethnic cleansing and the vanquished being forced to cede land to the Serbs. Additionally, the Bosnian Serb leadership has pushed for international recognition of its so-called "Republik of Serpska," (SDS) but it has failed to achieve any acknowledgement for an independent state within Bosnian borders. The more radical elements among this group also advocate some form of union with Serbia proper into an amalgamated "Greater Serbia."

At the strategic military and political level, the Bosnian Serbs must maintain their relationship with rump Yugoslavia (i.e. Serbia proper and Montenegro). Previously, they relied on the Yugoslav government both for materiel and moral support as well

as providing a conduit and ally in international diplomatic efforts. This relationship was dramatically affected by the sanctions imposed through the United Nations against Serbia proper and has now resulted in a power struggle for ethnic Serbian leadership between Presidents Slobodan Milosevich of Serbia and Radovan Karadzic of the SDS. The result has been the cut-off of most types of supply for the Bosnian Serbs as evidenced by their recent attempts to confiscate fuel and clothing from UN convoys.

The Bosnian Muslim government has not only exploited this situation but has also successfully attacked the relationship between the Serbs on two fronts: first, through its diplomatic efforts to paint the Serbs as aggressors; and secondly, as discussed below, through skillful attempts to manipulate the world news media. Furthermore, the Muslims have become adept at provoking the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) into various sorts of military action. They realize that the BSA will often overreact to their original instigations by replying in much greater force and sometimes causing civilian casualties and damage. The resulting negative world opinion makes it even more difficult for the Bosnian Serbs to get supplies and puts them on the defensive in diplomatic efforts.

In military terms, the BSA has two major problems: force sustainment and lines of communication. Although it appears to be abundantly supplied with arms and ammunition of all types bequeathed from the stocks of the former Yugoslav army (JNA), the BSA lacks fuel, food, clothing, and other supplies which must be procured and provided to the forces in the field. International efforts to maintain sanctions and the Deny Flight program which restricts the ability of the BSA to provide logistics support by aircraft exacerbate this problem.

The other significant BSA weakness pertains to the distinct disadvantage caused by exterior lines of communication. The BSA relies on the road networks not only to supply their forces but to rapidly move their heavy weapons to the areas where they are fighting. The mountainous terrain of Bosnia, coupled with the paucity of usable roads, makes it difficult to move these items effectively over long distances. However, the Bosnian Muslims have not been successful in attacking this deficiency since they lack the necessary long range weapon systems and C3I.

Tactically, the BSA's strength lies in its advantages in artillery and tanks as well as the training of its officer corps. The BSA has a shortage of infantry in comparison with the Muslims and must depend on its overwhelming advantage in firepower to win battles. Its preferred tactic has been to employ indirect fire to destroy the defenders or force them to retreat and then move forward to occupy the ground. In terms of military professionalism, many BSA officers served in the former JNA and enjoy a

significant advantage in military education and competence vis-a-vis their Muslim opponents.

The Bosnian Muslims

The primary aim of the Bosnian Muslim government has been to preserve the entity of Bosnia as a multi-ethnic (but Muslim-dominated) state comprising the territory of the republic as it existed prior to the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. If that eventually proves impossible, its minimum goals appear to be to preserve a state which consists of the territory occupied primarily by Muslims, retain control of Sarajevo and Mostar, preserve an economically viable state, and build a nation which is able to defend itself.

The strategy followed by the Muslims (Bosniacs is now their preferred term) to achieve these goals consists of striking indirectly at the BSA while simultaneously continuing to assemble a military force which can not only defend its present territory but in fact seize the land which they feel rightfully comprises the Bosnian state. The Muslim government recognizes that much of the international media remains sympathetic to its cause and has done much to exploit this advantage. For example, the typical Serbian overreaction to military provocations enables the Muslims to portray themselves as innocent victims while overstating the extent of their suffering. The exaggerated casualty count and damage done to Gorazde last April and Bihac this November probably represent the best examples of this type of propaganda campaign to date.

A secondary but related Bosniac goal concerns transforming the role of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). Although the UN mission statement clearly excludes UNPROFOR as a combatant except in cases of legitimate self defense, the Muslim government continually attempts to entangle it in the conflict. President Izetbegovic has proclaimed that the UN has no reason to remain neutral and has demanded that his nation be protected. The Bosniac army has also tried to involve UNPROFOR by covertly attacking UN troops and attempting to blame the BSA.

The Muslim government continues to rely heavily on humanitarian assistance and this benefits them both militarily and politically. Much of the aid must flow through Sarajevo - the Bosniac geographic center of gravity - and such circumstances dictate that UNPROFOR hold the city in its role of providing military assistance to humanitarian agencies. This operation gives legitimacy to the Muslim cause and helps population defense by preventing a general BSA offensive against the capital. The Bosniacs receive food and supplies delivered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and various non-governmental organizations to sustain a large part of their population. Some of these stocks are diverted to outfit

their army, and the BSA attacks this dependence by interfering with the convoys and flights which bring humanitarian aid to the Muslim population. The Serbs sometimes accomplish their aims by hindering and blocking the free movement of vehicles which must traverse in and out of the confrontation lines to reach Bosniac areas. The BSA also periodically disrupts operations at the UN-controlled Sarajevo Airport. Although often disputed, the UNHCR assesses that the Bosniac population would probably starve over the winter months if humanitarian aid is blocked. This state of affairs would force the Muslim government to capitulate and concede defeat.

Another strategic weakness for the Bosnian government concerns regional communications and cohesion. In order to survive as a national entity and continue to prosecute the war against the BSA, the Bosniacs must maintain the geographic integrity of the core region of central Bosnia with Sarajevo as its hub. This requirement includes control of the regional lines of communication which allow humanitarian aid to flow and consequently permit the central government to exercise control over the outlying regions. As noted, the BSA has frequently attacked this weakness by interdicting roads and physically controlling the ground to cut off parts of the Bosnian state. Examples of this action have included the isolation of the Gorazde, Zepa, and Srebrenica enclaves. The Bosniacs have also been concerned for some time that the BSA might attack south of the city of Tuzla and cut off the critical road and air network in this area from the rest of Bosnia. BSA success in sealing off this region would render the Bosniacs incapable of maneuvering and sustaining their forces. It would also deny the Muslim government the ability to exert sufficient control over the most important part of its territory outside of Sarajevo.

From a strictly military point of view, the Bosniacs require the use of the major lines of communication to maneuver forces and accomplish their operational plan. They must retain the capability to shift forces and react to BSA offensive operations. Conversely, they also must maintain their own offensive initiatives to keep the BSA off-balance and overextended along the entire confrontation line. While the Bosniacs cannot maximize their advantage of interior lines because of the intertwining of forces, they must nevertheless retain the flexibility to maneuver forces to their best advantage.

The issue of territoriality constitutes another Bosniac military weakness. They possess very few mobile or maneuver forces which they can employ in major offensive operations. Much of their army is derived from the old territorial defense units which were organized into "opstina" (county) brigades. Most of these units remain in the area of their original opstina and are manned by former reservists and conscript soldiers drawn from it. Their ties to the land make these troops reluctant to move from the area. Accordingly, the Muslims have recruited several mobile brigades from refugees who have lost their territory and now have a stronger incentive for fighting.

At least one brigade is comprised of personnel originally from Croatia, and another unit, the 7th Muslim Brigade, has tended to attract Islamic extremists. The latter has a reputation for aggressive behavior and an offensive spirit and enjoys the prestige of being considered the best unit of its size in the Muslim army. The Bosniacs regularly use these mobile brigades for major operations and move them from area to area based on operational needs. The BSA attempts to counter these units by deception operations designed to draw them to an area where they cannot affect the main battle. When these tactics prove successful, the BSA then improves its chances of success by forcing the Bosniacs to fight using inferior units.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the single largest advantage which the Bosniacs possess: their infantry. Their infantry constitutes the strongest part of their army and numbers nearly 120,000 - which gives them a 2:1 advantage in manpower over the BSA. However, while it is organized into corps and brigades, it generally appears capable of only limited battalion size operations. The Muslims have fewer heavy weapons and aircraft than the BSA and must rely on their infantry to a greater extent. In that the Bosniac infantry has been "bloodied" from being forced to leave its trenches to seize terrain, it has also become more effective than its BSA counterpart which cannot afford substantial casualties. To date, the BSA has been able to neutralize this advantage by counting on the use of heavy fire support to kill or drive off the Muslim infantry. The BSA has chosen to fight on ground where the infantry does not have the advantage such as relatively flat open terrain. The Serbs have also utilized large numbers of antipersonnel mines to canalize the Bosniacs into areas where supporting fires prove most effective against ground troops. Additionally, the BSA has avoided fighting in built up areas; instead, it employs siege tactics to starve the defenders out. Should the Bosniacs lose effective use of their infantry, they would find it almost impossible to achieve tactical success.

THE CROATS

Space constraints preclude a more thorough discussion of the Croats, but despite some recent international media reporting to the contrary, they remain less significant players in the current civil war. They have expressed interest in reclaiming some of their lost territory, but accounts of them taking the unprecedented step of coordinating attacks with Muslims have been greatly exaggerated. It would certainly be premature to assume that current activity portends greater Croat-Muslim cooperation. Although the Croats and Muslims formed a "federation" last March, both groups continue to distrust each other. The Bosnian Muslim government attempts to display unity with the Croats in the media; however, this condition exists only in Sarajevo where the Croat Archbishop supports combined efforts with the Bosniacs. The situation in the hinterland remains decidedly different where the Croats feel "sold out" and frequently prefer Serbs over Muslims. They also oppose any efforts to draft Croatian men into

the Bosnian army. To date, the Croats have refused to conduct joint operations with Muslims, and in fact, neither side possesses the C2 capability necessary to achieve such action. Rather, the Croats will continue to act independently in accordance with their own respective local interests.

THE FUTURE

Any attempt to discern the future of the warring factions in this volatile environment is fraught with danger. Nonetheless, prudent foresight remains an analytical responsibility and some judgements must be rendered. Current irreconcilable differences between the Bosnian Serbs and Muslims will likely impede any realistic long term prospects for peace. The Serbs now hold 70% of the territory and insist that they should not be deprived of less than 64% - the amount which belonged to them at the outset of the war. The real issue for the Serbs, however, concerns quality of land rather than quantity. Proposed agreements have deprived them of strategic terrain and thus they have proven intransigent on other issues.

The Bosniacs and Croats together demand at least 51% of the area. The Muslims, however, desire to control the entire country. They have demonstrated unwillingness to compromise on this figure and will not sign a peace agreement which they fear will freeze the current confrontation lines in place. Furthermore, they continue to delude themselves that time is on their side due to manpower advantages and feel the tide of war will eventually turn in their favor. If Bosniac strategy should ultimately be rewarded by an externally imposed solution to this war, the Muslim government will then face a new territorial problem with the Croats rather than the Serbs.

Perhaps the most important lesson to remember about this conflict for the future concerns American proclivity to simplify and generalize between "good guys" and "bad guys." Such distinctions do not exist in Bosnia.